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ABSTRACT

Focusing on children's developmental use of written language in kindergarten and first grade, this report looks at connections between the social and academic dimensions of classroom life. The first section examines literacy as an aspect of growing up and becoming a member of society. By highlighting the social and academic divisiveness schooling may promote, this section provides a backdrop for looking into a classroom in which social and academic concerns are interwoven. The second and largest section of the report focuses on one class that was observed from kindergarten through first grade. After delineating the age, gender, and ethnicity of the focal children, the report describes the activities in which they engaged and presents excerpts of children's conversations. The behavior displayed by the children both as a group and individually is also discussed. The third section clarifies and qualifies the concept of unintentional helping, that is, how children's socializing can improve their writing skills, discussing the power of children's social lives and balancing this discussion with a consideration of their need for sensitive, guiding teachers. The concluding section reviews the potentially positive power of the children's social world to support written language growth and stresses several ideas that explicitly are not being suggested by the report, e.g., that children should be "turned loose" or that their work should not be evaluated. (JD)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

Technical Report No. 2

UNINTENTIONAL HELPING IN THE PRIMARY GRADES: Writing in the Children's World

Anne Haas Dyson

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University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720

Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

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UNINTENTIONAL HELPING IN THE PRIMARY GRADES:
Writing in the Children's World

By

Anne Haas Dyson
University of California, Berkeley

After a pleasant year in kindergarten, Regina had assumed that she would return to kindergarten the next fall. Then she found that she was going to be in FIRST grade:

> I got so sad. Cause I didn't know who was gonna be my friend...I was spending all my time thinking Sunday. "What'em I gonna do? Tomorrow's school!" That's when I was turned into a first grade [r]. I say, "I want to go to my ol' [class]. I bet nobody's gonna be my friend."

As it happened, Regina did have friends in the first grade. In fact, most of the children from her kindergarten class were members of her new combined first/second grade class. And was she happy in this situation? "You better believe it ."

The influence of peers on the schooling experience has been discussed primarily in the literature on older school children (Goodlad, 1983; Labov, 1982). But children in the early school years are intensely interested in each other. During these years, children's awareness of themselves and their peers increases notably, as they work to define themselves as competent members of their social group--as "Me too'ers"--and at the same time, as unique, special beings, special parts of that group (Gardner, 1982).

In this self- and group-creating work, which extends throughout the life span, symbolic tools--including drawing and writing--can play a particularly helpful role, for the use of any symbol system is both a communicative act using a social tool and an expression of individual uniqueness (Vygotsky, 1962).

In this chapter I argue that in classrooms that allow writing to blossom within the children's world--as a part of their efforts to define themselves as socially competent but unique individuals--written language will help children meet these social challenges and, at the same time, these social concerns will help children develop as writers. That is, the academic and the social will be intertwined. This mutually supportive situation can be created even without the support of explicit attempts by the teacher to have children help each other. Just by "being kids," children may unintentionally help each other become literate.

Conversely, classrooms may work to separate the academic and the social lives of children. Children's social lives may be played out primarily in opposition to--or, at least, around and under--official academic concerns. These classrooms, particularly those serving urban, nonmainstream children, may contribute to the opposition between social and academic success highlighted in studies of inner city adolescents (Labov, 1982; Ogbu, 1985). As Regina suggested, it may be better to fail and have friends than to be promoted and have none.

To illustrate these suggested connections between the social and academic dimensions of classroom life, I will look closely within Regina's classroom in "O Elementary," a magnet school in an urban area on the west coast. In this room, the social and academic concerns of children were interwoven in the official classroom community because children had ample official opportunities to use language for their own purposes and to support and respond to each other.

In the first part of this chapter, I provide a backdrop for looking in this classroom. I examine literacy as an aspect of growing up and becoming a member of society. A major portion of that growing up happens at school; I thus highlight the social and academic divisiveness schooling may promote. To illustrate this divisiveness, I give a brief look at another, more traditional primary classroom.

The second and major part of this chapter centers on Regina's classroom. Finally in the third section, I clarify and qualify the concept of unintentional helping and balance this discussion of the power of children's social lives with a consideration of children's need for sensitive, guiding teachers.

GROWING UP WITH WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Literacy and Daily Life

The theoretical perspective undergirding this chapter is both sociolinguistic and developmental. I assume that written language is a social tool that functions in varied ways in our society. As children grow up, they learn about this tool--its purposes, its features, its processing demands--as they encounter it in meaningful activities. Even in communities where literacy assumes a relatively minor role, children are not isolated from written language (Heath, 1983). The adults who live with children write notes, jot down phone numbers and needed grocery items, fill out forms and checks, and so children take to pen and paper too. They participate in literacy activities with more skilled others, explore and play with print's functions and features, and use it as a means of self-expression (Dyson, 1981; Gundlach, McLane, Scott, & McNamee, 1985; Tizard & Hughes, 1984). From the beginning, then, literacy is woven into the familiar fabric of everyday life.

In observing young children using written language, though, I take a developmental stance. That is, I assume that children do not simply attempt to imitate adult models. Children actively construct written language, as they do other sorts of symbol systems, so that it is sensible from their points of view (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Literacy and Schooling

In our culture, beginning formal schooling also marks the beginning of special attention to the written language symbol system. This formal attention to literacy learning is not necessarily an "unnatural" thing. As Kagan (1984, p. 264) observes, "In most contemporary cultures, as in those throughout history, 7- and 8-year-old children begin the tasks of gathering wood, planting, weeding, hunting, cooking, and taking care of younger children. Children in modern societies have only one outstanding challenge: they must master the tasks of the school--reading, spelling, writing, and arithmetic."

Children from a variety of backgrounds go to school and expect to learn to read and write (Heath, 1983). Of course many educators now recognize that children read and write in their own ways well before formal schooling begins. Nonetheless, I have observed that kindergartners in traditional classrooms often connect learning to read and write "like grown-ups" to turning 6 and starting first grade--a belief consistent with that of the dominant culture. As 5-year-old Courtney explained while drawing Santa Claus, "I would spell Santa Claus if I was 6."

Although both adults and children may value literacy, it does not follow that adults and children share the same perspective on literacy and how it is learned. As noted above, children interpret behaviors modeled by adults in ways that make sense in their own lives (Cazden, 1986; Corsaro, 1985; Steinberg & Cazden, 1979).

Literacy and the Social Lives of Children

Children's lives in group settings center on their relationships with each other. In the child collective that arises in a day care or classroom, children find the comfort of being members of a group that is "in this together" and, at the same time, the opportunity to further define their individual uniqueness as they compare themselves with their peers (Rubin, 1980). As Dewey (1916) noted, school children are not preparing to become social participants--they are social participants. In fact, the whole of childhood socialization can be viewed as "children's participation in and production of a series of peer cultures in which childhood knowledge and practices are gradually transformed into knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the adult world" (Corasaro, 1985, pp. 74-75).

As previously observed, the developmental literature portrays the years from 5 to 7 as a time when children's awareness of self and others is particularly visible, for these years are "a watershed" for trends that have been gradually taking shape over the preschool period (Gardner, 1982). Particularly, symbols--words, pictures, numbers, music--become a dominant force in children's behaviors (Flavell, 1985; Gardner, 1982; Nelson, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). This fluency and control over symbols allows young children (a) to express themselves in delightful and unique ways, (b) to be increasingly effective communicators and collaborators with others (Cooper, Marquis, & Ayers-Lopez, 1982; Garvey, 1977, 1984; Korzenik, 1977), and (c) to explore a basic tool of our society, a tool used by adults and thus of interest to children (Schickedanz & Sullivan, 1984; Tizard & Hughes, 1984). That is, it allows them opportunities to participate in the social world and to explore their own mental worlds.

So young children, bearing the tools of words, pictures, and other symbols, enter formal schooling and continue there the work of creating the "I," the "you," and the "we." The thesis of this chapter is that the way in which writing is bound up with the creation of self and others in school will be affected by the way in which classrooms provide opportunities for the academic and the social lives of children to intertwine. For schools do not simply help children become literate. They present literacy within activities and imbue it with values that may make it work in more or less productive ways within the child collective of particular classrooms.

Child Response to School Literacy

Many observers have pointed out that aspects of traditional American schooling may make school literacy a negative unifying force in children's lives, particularly for urban minority children. That is, children may join together in their discomfort with or, more strongly, their rejection of academic demands. Among those aspects of school life most often cited as divisive are those that touch on children's relationships with each other--on the "I" and the "we": children having to work silently, to value adult more than self and peer approval, to compete with friends for that adult approval (Gilbert & Gay, 1985; Gillmore, 1983; Labov, 1982; Philips, 1972; Tharp et al., 1984).

The main concern in this chapter is with the social lives of a group of socially and ethnically diverse primary school children who share a particular experience--an urban public school classroom. In this situation, some children may be better able than others, for both personal and social reasons, to cope productively with the school's demands. Nonetheless, the stories of most children's school lives--in fact, of our own school memories--are threaded with the "I" and the "we"; that is, regardless of cultural background, they are stories of children finding themselves among their friends.

Literacy may be bound up with children's social concerns in positive or negative ways. In a previous study in an ethnically and socially diverse second grade classroom, I found that school literacy was, to some extent, a unifying force among the children in that it provided them with a common problem--a force to grapple with (Dyson, 1984, 1985 a,b). Since I have discussed that classroom elsewhere, it will receive only a brief examination here. The room deserves a peek, though, as it illustrates well how children's social and academic lives can be alienated, one from the other, and thus provides a contrast to the tight intertwining of children's social and academic concerns in School 0.

In this room, located in "School A" in a small southeastern city, children's daily work consisted primarily of completing the "seatwork" that filled the chalkboards each morning. There were misspelled words and unpunctuated sentences to be righted, suffixes and prefixes to be added to bare roots, words in need of sentences, sentences in need of missing words.

Each morning, as the children made their way down the rows to their desks, they compared the amount of boardwork each reading group received; children with the least amount of written work occasionally rejoiced; children with a great deal of written work more often complained among themselves about the unfairness of it all.

In doing their morning work, the children were to proceed quietly, carefully, and quickly. While the children did not talk about being quiet or careful during that work, they did remark about quickness. Whispers of "Which one are you on? I'm on 10, are you?" linked closely seated children together as they sat at their separate desks doing their "own" work.

Accuracy became important only when the teacher checked their work. At that point, the whispers changed: "I got that one right." "I did too." "So?" In the whispers, success was put on display; failure was kept quiet or shrugged off.

Thus, in the work that took the majority of the language arts period, the children joined together as kids who had to do the assigned work. As a group, they rejoiced in

having less work, bragged about spending the least amount of time on that work, and, depending on their evaluated performance, defined success as meeting the teacher's standards.

This assigned work, however, was not the only writing that the children did. The clandestine communication noted above suggested the existence of the children's social world, which operated around and underneath the official academic world. And, in the children's world, there was much use of the social tool of writing. In effect, there was an "underground writing curriculum" (Dyson, 1985b).

This curriculum was child-controlled and revealed itself primarily when the children's boardwork was completed. At that time, the children were relatively free to do as they pleased, as long as they were quiet and stayed at their desks or at a small table in the back of the room. This underground curriculum, however, also revealed itself during whole class *Weekly Reader* lessons, when pencils and paper could easily be hidden behind a propped up newspaper, and, less often, during the morning boardwork period when a child apparently elected to take a break.

Within the underground curriculum, the children used writing to link themselves in what seem more positive ways than those ways of the official curriculum. Literacy connected the children quite literally as they passed notes or phone numbers across the rows. More typically, though, literacy connected the children as they monitored each other's behavior and joined in on similar activities. They were particularly attentive to the practical and playful uses others made of print--desk placards that stood on their desks announcing their names, phone numbers, and, in some cases, their positions (e.g., police chief), trash bins that hooked to the sides of their desks with bits of tape, containers for pencils and crayons, "Keep Out" signs, and telephone number books.

The children also produced more extended written language. On days when boardwork was light, two or three children might be seen at the table in the back of the room, writing stories, copying stories from books (a surprisingly popular activity), drawing pictures with captions, and, on one occasion, writing letters to boy friends!

In the underground curriculum, the children admired quantity. More was better than less. More stories, more poems, more words--all could be bragged about. In addition, though, the children were interested in the content of other children's stories and poems; children who sat next to each other could be observed reading a peer's story or admiring an interestingly constructed object.

The productivity and variability of the literacy produced by the second graders in the underground writing curriculum were impressive. Yet, that curriculum was controlled to some extent by the amount of "official" work the children were given, and in addition, most of the interactions among children--with the exception of the constructed artifacts--were limited to children within whispering distance of each other. Further, children typically interacted only with others experiencing similar degrees of academic success, since the children sat according to reading group membership.

The possibility of bringing the liveliness of the unofficial curriculum into the official one was hinted at during one brief activity that occurred daily every other month--the ten-minute morning free writing period (for an extensive description of this activity, see Dyson 1985a). During this period the children were free to write whatever they wanted, and then, if they chose, they could read their work to their peers.

As an audience, the children rewarded entries they perceived as humorous with audible laughter and, when the child writer had returned to his or her seat, with whispered requests like "Can I see it?". They also adopted for their own use appealing topics of others.

Beyond these general responses that seemed to characterize the class, I noted that individual children appeared to use this activity to achieve certain social ends. For example, Ayrio and his close friends most often wrote about experiences they shared, such as Cub Scout meetings or YMCA soccer games, or objects of mutual interest, such as video games or recent movies. Free writing was an opportunity to proclaim their friendship. For Bonita, on the other hand, free writing seemed to provide an opportunity to present herself positively to her peers; she wrote and read pieces about things she was going to get to do--but often, in fact, never did. (For examples of the children's behaviors, see Dyson, 1985a.)

As a result of observing this class, I saw the concept of "unintentional helping" begin to emerge. That is, it seemed that the children were helping each other learn about literacy--the range of purposes for which it can be used, the techniques used to capture an audience's interest, the power of print to help one achieve social status. But this help was not being intentionally offered. That is, there were no "peer tutoring" programs, no "peer writing conferences," no official "collaborative writing activities." Children made use of an available tool--writing--simply because of their interest in each other and their desire to be a part of the social scene in their room, that is, to be accepted and perhaps even admired by others. School provided them with paper, pencils, and some practice on conventions--the children provided each other with purpose and "sense."

In contrast to School A, this concept of "unintentional helping"--of the linking of children's social lives with literacy--blossomed for me in School 0. Here was a classroom where there were fewer fences between the social and the academic concerns of children.

THE LINKING OF CHILDREN'S ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL LIVES

Introduction to the Observed Children of School O

The classroom of interest here was a combined first/second grade. Like the room discussed above, its social and ethnic membership reflected the diversity of its community. There were 30 class members from Anglo, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and mixed ethnicities. Their teacher, Margaret, was an Anglo female in her sixties. ("Margaret" is a pseudonym, like most names use in this chapter.) Margaret was the children's language arts teacher; she had also been the language arts teacher for most of the children the previous year in the kindergarten and first grade.

The children in this classroom were physically situated much differently than the children observed in School A. When the children arrived each morning, they sat in chairs arranged in a circle. During this opening meeting, Margaret talked with them about a particular language arts concept, such as punctuation, contractions, homonyms; she sometimes read the children stories; and she "celebrated" the work of those who had completed a journal (a homemade construction paper book consisting of approximately 13 lined/blank paper pairs). "Celebrating" a journal involved letting the child pick three stories to read to the class, highlighting what was particularly special about that child's

work, and presenting the child with an "award"--a homemade certificate, signed by Margaret and her aide, Susan, telling to child to "write on."

After the opening meeting, preparation for journal writing began. Although each of the children had a personal journal, they each selected a pencil from a can and a packet of markers from a basket. Then they went to their tables, which seated six to eight, and began to draw, write--and talk.

Margaret, her aide, and on occasion parent volunteers circulated among the children, talking to them about their topics, helping with spelling, and urging loud children to "be quiet and get to work." Talking among the children, while not specifically encouraged, was expected and not prohibited.

I observed in this room an average of twice per week from February through May 1986; two research assistants, Carol Heller and Mary Gardner, also observed twice per week. In total, our team observed the children an average of 6 hours per week. In our observations we focused on seven children, four first graders and three second graders. (A fourth observed second grader was a member of a different class; see Table 1.) I had earlier observed these same children an average of twice per week from January through May 1985.

TABLE 1
Age, Gender, and Ethnicity of Focal Children

	Age*	Gender	Ethnicity
First Graders			
Maggie	6.1	Female	Anglo
Regina	7.1	Female	Black
Jesse	6.7	Male	Anglo
Rueben	6.11	Male	Hispanic
Second Graders			
Sonia	7.3	Female	Hispanic
Mitzi**	7.4	Female	Anglo
Jake	7.6	Male	Mixed (Black/Anglo)
Manuel	8.4	Male	Hispanic

* Age as of February 1, 1986 (given in Years. Months).

** During the observations from February through May 1986, Mitzi was not in the same classroom as the other seven children.

In comparison with the orderliness of School A, I initially found Margaret's room overwhelming. Entering the room in January 1985, I was immediately struck by all the talk. This talk was not just a quiet hum but was punctuated by laughter, loud bids for a peer's attention ("Hey Jake!"), and an occasional yell (from the children, not Margaret,

who never yelled). Moreover, the spirit of the room was different, although I could not initially say why. Soon, though, I no longer noticed the talk--I just listened to it. And the spirit of the room was clear. It was the spirit of a room with a strong child collective.

In the following sections, I describe the nature of this child collective and highlight the connection of this collective to the children's writing. The information reported comes primarily from the data collected during 1986. Particularly it comes from the annotated transcripts (i.e., audiotape transcripts supplemented with field notes) collected during 46 days of observation. (For a description of data collection and analysis techniques used in this project, see Dyson, 1986.)

To illustrate the linking of the academic and the social in this classroom--and, particularly, the concept of unintentional helping--I will begin by introducing the children as a collective, as a group. In examining the ways in which the children expressed themselves as a group, it will become clear that official school writing was woven throughout these social behaviors. Then, I will focus specifically on the observed children's behaviors during the journal activity, examining the social themes underlying the children's interactions; this section will illustrate most clearly the concept of "unintentional helping," as children will be seen responding socially and in coincidentally helpful ways to each other.

The Child Collective

The School 0 children displayed a sense of being "kids" in school together in varied ways. First, they frequently joined together *to engage in collective or joint action*, sometimes spontaneously doing group activities previously initiated by Margaret. For example, they spontaneously sang "Happy Birthday" when Margaret announced that it was her birthday, just as they regularly sang to the "birthday child." At the work tables, when one child began reciting a television commerical jingle or singing a pop song ("Born in the USA" was especially popular), others joined in.

Sometimes the group was called to action by a spokesperson. One day Margaret announced that the reading teacher would be retiring soon. Jake immediately stood up and loudly claimed:

Ex. 1 Many people don't want Ruth to leave cause she's got all those puzzles and games and stuff. How many people don't want Ruth to leave?

All of the children raised their hands, apparently wanting to have their say in the matter. Margaret assured them that the puzzles and games belonged to the school, not to the retiring teacher.

A second way of expressing their identity as "kids together" was *to activate a group memory*. Some memories were of activities or interests the children shared outside of school--television shows, popular singers, baseball and football teams. But many were of shared school experiences: "Remember when" a child got in trouble, when they made "fruit" in art class, when they played in the sand on the playground during a rainstorm? Jake considered a vehicle he had "invented" (i.e., he had drawn in his journal) to be a significant event his peers should recall:

Ex. 2	Jake:	Who made up the bubble cars?
	Rueben:	My brother have a bubble car.
	Jake:	(louder) Who made up the bubble cars?
	Sonia:	Your dad for one thing.
	Jake:	*I* made up the bubble cars.
	Sonia:	Well, how in the world could Rueben have one?!
	. . .	[Three dots indicate omitted data.]
	Jake:	I was the creator of the bubble car.
	Sonia:	You're not a famous inventor.

On another day, Sonia acknowledged that Jake might indeed be famous for his invention by the time he was ten. As if to support this prediction, when Jake stood before the class to share a completed journal, several children shouted out, "Bubble cars!"

As a third mechanism for expressing the collective, the children joined together *to react or respond to school procedures and activities*. Who was the substitute teacher? Was she mean? Would she know where the special game they were supposed to play was? And like the children in School A--and like workers in any organization, for that matter--they wondered if they were being treated fairly:

Ex. 3	Sonia:	Finally I get free time.
	Jake:	I should get free time. I should get extra credit [a term Margaret never used] because I finished two journals and I'm gonna finish my story. I should get some credit . She doesn't give me credit. [Margaret never talked about giving children "credit".]
	Jesse:	I know. She never gives you credit.
	Jake:	She doesn't give ME credit, that's for sure.
	Jesse:	She never gives me credit, for sure.

Example 3 illustrates two characteristics of the children's talk about school procedures: the use of "school jargon" and the emphasis on the teacher's authority. In addition to "credit," the children used the terms "flunk" and "pass" or "get promoted," although I never observed Margaret use these terms. They also discussed older children who had been "expelled" or "suspended." They even talked about an elementary school near many of their homes, a school where children were supposedly quite "bad"; the school was in a naturally integrated, working class neighborhood close to, in Jake's words, the "middle, the crazy part" of the city. The "you" in the following discussion is clearly kids:

Ex. 4	Jesse:	They be bad all the time there. People come home crying. People come home crying.
	Jake:	Yeah?
	Jesse:	Yeah.
	Jake:	I'd sure like to go to that school then. Do they bench you or anything? [i.e., Do teachers make kids sit on a bench during recess if they get in trouble?]
	Jesse:	Uuuuhhhh--
	Jake:	Suspend you?
	Jesse:	Uh, probably not that much.

Example 4 also illustrates the children's interest in authority. In their own classroom, Margaret was a low-key authority figure, from my viewpoint as observer. She expected the children to follow the rules, but she quietly and respectfully pointed out these rules when there was a need. But to the children, Margaret seemed to be another "superhero," one with powers to be feared, depended upon, or defied:

Ex. 5 Jesse has used the scotch tape to shape a boat in his journal, an inappropriate use of scotch tape in this classroom:

Jake: You might have gotten busted by Margaret. You shouldn't have taken such a chance, because she will bust.

Ex. 6 Rueben and his brother, Pedro, claim that they will stand up to Margaret's power:

Pedro: Rueben! One more page is all I have to (do) [in my journal], but I'm not going to share it.
Jesse: You have to.
Pedro: Margaret's gonna make you. (laughs). OOOOOOhhh [as in "you're gonna be in trouble."]
Rueben: Nobody's gonna make him, not even Margaret.

A fourth way in which the children expressed the child collective was *to identify and share their common problems* as "kids." Certainly their problems included concerns shared with adults, including AIDS disease, starvation in Africa, terrorists in airports, the Challenger space tragedy, and the possibility of a war between the United States and Russia. In fact, Sonia, Jesse, and Jake once discussed their desire to wait to grow up "til everybody dies . . . and there wouldn't be anybody but us." This was wise, explained Jake, as "there might be a Vietnam again":

Ex. 7 Jake: They're going to ship out machine guns and, everybody, even the kids--They'll give them to every single kid in the United States.
Jesse: Except for babies.
Jake: Kids would be wild, kids would be the best.
Jesse: I know. They just die first, Man. I know why. Kids are small.
Jake: The kids are small. The kids are mean.
Jesse: I know.
Jake: I'm the slyest. I'm the--I'm sly.

Perhaps Jake saw himself as surviving such a horrible yet--for a child captivated by war stories--exciting prospect.

Among the more frequently discussed and more modest problems were losing teeth (having "The Great Gap" in the front, as they called it), whether or not there was a Santa Claus, getting, keeping, and losing friends and pets, riding a bike without training wheels, just getting a bike, completing a journal, figuring out a spelling, and finding a black marker that actually wrote.

Jake considered writing itself to be a problem kids confronted:

Ex. 8 Jake has stopped writing and begun drawing. His journal entry does not seem finished to me, so I ask him if he is done writing. Jake answers philosophically:

Jake:	I think so. When I was in kindergarten I learned, I liked to write. When you get older you don't like to write.
Dyson:	Why?
Jake:	That's just the way with kids, some kids.
Dyson:	Oh. What happens to those kids?
Jake:	Um. They like to write and write and write. So they just write, because they love to write.
Dyson:	And then what happens to those kids?
Jake:	And then (large sigh), some kids just stop writing for a while.
Dyson:	Why?
Jake:	I don't know. That's happening to me. That's why I like to draw more than I like to work. [Note that work is writing, not drawing.]
Dyson:	MMmmmmmmm.

So Jake appears to admit indirectly that his story is not quite up to his usual standard. But he explains that what is happening to him is just the way some kids are--it's a common problem, just a stage. Not to worry.

Social Concerns during Journal Time: Networking

The previous section presented ways in which the children proclaimed themselves to be a group--"kids"--facing common challenges, creating a collective memory, and capable, albeit in a modest sense, of taking collective action. In illustrating the child collective, examples that pertain to writing have not been placed in a separate section because they did not occur in a "separate section"--written language was interwoven with the existence of the child collective.

This section pushes further inside the collective itself, describing the social themes or intentions that seemed to underlie the children's interactions--their "networking"--within the group. That is, the focus will not be on the children's distinctive relationship to the adult world, but on their relationships with each other as reflected in their talk. That talk reflected a desire to be not only a competent part of the group--a competent kid--but also a special, distinctive part of that group, worthy of esteem.

Managing Resources

As previously noted, the children did not own their own pencils and marking pens. Rather, they selected these valued commodities each day from the common stores. One social concern or intention, then, was to manage these tools: "This is my eraser." "I need a blue." "Which is the darkest green?" "Who needs purple?" In addition, the children selected their own space, and space too was a valued commodity: "Don't squish me." "Get your book off mine." "Don't bump me."

As with any valued commodity, materials and space could be used to establish positive or negative links with others. Rueben, for example, frequently offered his markers to other boys, "You wanta use mine? You can use mine." Jesse consistently turned down Rueben's offers as he wanted to use Jake's markers.

Jake, on the other hand, had a colored pencil feud going with Kenji that lasted the entire semester. Jake and Kenji "ripped each other off" by taking the "whole tin can" of colored pencils when the other was not looking, made "straight deals" about who would get to use the pencils on a particular day, and, if they weren't careful, they might "get busted" by their teacher for failing to share.

Not only pencils and markers, but the products of those tools were also valued. While in School A, *less* official writing was better, in School O, *more* was better. The children noted how many pages they had left before their current journal would be completed and how many journals they had already completed ("I'm on my third journal."). Speed and quantity were in fact valued in many activities. For example, Jake, Jesse, and Rueben valued these qualities in baseball, among other areas: a "helluva good baseball player" throws fast and makes many home runs. Sonia valued them in name writing; one day she even brought a watch with a second hand and timed all the kids at her table to see who was fastest. And, while just being a "little kid" could be a rationale for one's lack of ability in a particular area, all of the children participated in conversations in which more "years old" was clearly better. Seven-year-old Jake even bragged to six-year-old Jesse, "You'll always be behind me."

Adult readers may consider this continual fascination with tools and with numbers odd, or perhaps cute. However, one need only recall our own concern, particularly those of us who are academics, with just these things. Discussion of personal computers, word processing programs, and the like are part of the social concerns of the community of academic writers. And, while we may wish it were not so, "more" is generally better, as in number of publications, number of years of professional service, and so on. In another area, say auto mechanics or medicine, the tools and numbers are different but still discussed. The observed children were becoming members of a literate society, and, in particular, of that group of society's members who actively write.

Displaying and Monitoring Competence

Like most of us, the children expressed clear desires to be competent at the things people their age should be able to do. The appropriate age was sometimes disputed, though, and there were mediating circumstances, like opportunity for practice. Writing, particularly spelling, appeared to be an important "competency," just as was bike riding. To illustrate, compare the following discussions, the first about bicycling, the second about spelling:

Ex. 9 Jake has just remarked that he has gotten a new bike.

Jake:	I just rode my bike up and down my hill 3 times-2 or 3 times.
Sonia:	(impressed) I can't even ride it once up and down the hill!
Jake:	You still have training wheels? (politely)
Sonia:	I'm learning how to ride on a 2-wheeler.
Regina:	(squeals)
Maggie:	I still have training wheels.
Regina:	My training wheels was took off when I was 6.
Jake:	I saw a 7-year-old--I saw a 7-year-old with training wheels.
Sonia:	I still have training wheels.
Regina:	By the time you're 6, the training wheels should be off.
Marcos:	I don't get to ride my bike that much. That's why I have training wheels.

Ex. 10 Regina has just heard Wesley ask for a word, *candy*, that she can in fact spell.

Regina: That is a shame.
Sonia: I don't know how to spell *candy*.
Regina: It's easy.
Sonia: How?
Regina: It's easy.
Jake: C-A-N-D.
Regina: Uh huh.
Sonia: Maybe my mom didn't teach me or I don't need to.

Regina states again that "That's a shame" and claims to also be able to spell Mississippi. However, she cannot spell Mississippi--and Wesley spells it correctly! Regina just grins and gets back to her story. (Later this same day, Regina does not know that "the kitchen sink" is a kind of ice cream, and Sonia retaliates, "You should know that by the time you're 5-years-old.")

As the above conversations indicate, some of the children were more tolerant of shortcomings than others, but all were interested in sharing their own and hearing about others' accomplishments.

Displaying competence: "Look what I'm doing!" As suggested above, the children at times announced their knowledge or skill--"I know" how to spell a particular word, my phone number, my address, a funny story; "I can" draw a jet, throw a fastball. Most of the time, however, the children called attention to their ongoing work. In the beginning of the study, these calls of "Look what I'm doing" generally had to do with how many pages or journals they had completed (as previously discussed) or with their ongoing drawing:

Ex. 11 Regina has just drawn a picture of a fancy house, which she thinks is really quite nice:

Regina: (to Sonia) Sonia, do you like this picture [her previous picture of a dentist's office] or that one [the candy house]?
Sonia: That one [the candy house].
Regina: Me too, because it's gonna be looking real pretty. Better than the first picture.
Sonia: Can I see the first picture in your journal?
Regina: Sure. That was my first picture.
. . .
This one says: "I went to the dentist. I had to stay in the line for three minutes because he was not here." I had to stay in there for an, for 3 or 4 minutes, and I thought that I would be there for my whole life.

In Example 11, Regina also spontaneously displayed her story for a peer. This sharing of written texts, rather than drawings, emerged only after the first two months of data collection. The children were generally willing, but not always enthusiastic, listeners:

Ex. 12 Sonia: (to Marcos) Want me to read this to you, Marcos?
Marcos: OK. From the starting? (worried)
Sonia: YES!

In their sharing of their feats, be they drawing or writing or a non-literary accomplishment, the children were aware of their own progress. For example, Jake noted that "This is the longest story I ever wrote" and, on another day, commented on his new "fresh A." "This is fresher than my other A." Regina noted, "Shoot I never made an Indian before." Manuel observed, while displaying his journal, "I used to ask for every word [i.e., now I don't ask for every word]."

Monitoring competence: "What are you doing?" As evident in the above examples, the children were clearly interested in each other's work. Drawing was easier to monitor than writing, because it was more clearly displayed (i.e., one did not have to lean over and decipher a code). However, when the children asked for spellings or reread their stories, the spellings and the stories were available and were commented on by others.

Beyond simply expressing curiosity in each other's activites, the children's responses implied both positive and negative evaluations of others' efforts. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, as the saying goes, and indeed the children did pick up on each other's behaviors. Those behaviors ranged from producing appealing rhymes and phrases to using particular visual and artistic devices.

For example, Jesse was particularly observant of Manuel and Jake. He attempted, as did several other children, to imitate the visual effects Manuel created with careful shadings and color mixing:

Ex. 13 Jesse: How do you make that with--Oh yeah. There's that orange. Is this the right color?
. . .
Manuel: Over here it's a little lighter.
Jesse: Oh, we did like this. Right?
Manuel: No, I think I need something a little darker but not too strong.
...
You need a long pencil to do this.

Jesse picked up, not only Jake's "tough talk" (getting busted" or "ripped off"), but also Jake's concern with periods. During writing, Jake consistently asked adults if he "had any sentences yet" or if he needed any periods. Jesse began asking similar questions--even though he had less grasp of the sentence concept. For example, one day Jesse bragged to the group that he only needed "two dots" [periods] in his whole story, as though that were a real accomplishment.

Jake himself, like many others, was impressed by Manuel's long story, which took up his whole journal. Jake decided to attempt such a feat himself:

Ex. 14 Sonia: That's good, Manuel.
Manuel: Thanks.
Sonia: How long is that story? The whole book?
Jake: Yeah.
Manuel: It's gonna be the whole book.

Jake: I think I'm gonna write about Manuel in the whole book.
Jesse: Yeah, I'm gonna--
Jake: I think I'm gonna write the rest of the book about this story, "Me and Manuel". . .

Jake also adopted his friend Wesley's technique of writing titles for his stories and his use of a particular story element--going forward in time (e.g., to the 21st century).

Not all the children's responses to others' efforts were positive. Noting others' errors or need for help often gave children opportunities to display their own skill. This was particularly true for spelling.

In this classroom, the observed children often asked adults, rather than other children, for spellings, perhaps because adults--who are supposed to spell better than children--were available for such requests. However, hearing another child express a need for a spelling consistently gave rise to offers to help from peers. These offers were not always accepted graciously--Jake, for example, did not like to have a first grader offer him help. In the face of such offers, he would attempt the word himself. The children also engaged in spelling duels, in which they would try to trip each other up on spellings. The following excerpts illustrate these behaviors:

Ex.15
Jesse: (to group in general) How do you spell *sun*?
Jake: Which kind? [Today the children had a lesson on homonyms.]
Sonia: Oh, it's easy, U-S-A. No, not USA.
Jesse: (laughs)
Sonia: It's U-N-A.
Jake: S-U-N, U-N. No. Sun.
Manuel: Yeah, S-U-N.
Jake: That's your son?
Manuel: No, it's a sun sun, not his son.
Jesse: (He has found the word in his dictionary)
Watch. This is gonna be easy. I'm not gonna look at it once. I'm not gonna look at it once. S-U-N.
(to Sonia) You wrote USA. (laughs)
I was, BORN in the USA. (singing)
Hey, Jake! Remember that song we were singing? We were, BORN in the USA. (singing)

Children: We were, BORN in San Jose, in the USA. (singing)

Ex. 16 Regina has just written *Home Sweet Home* in her drawing and is quite pleased with herself:

Regina: Joshua, do you know how to spell *sweet*?
Joshua: S-E--
Chris: Uh uh. S-W.
Regina: S-W-E-T. How do you spell *home*?

Joshua can in fact spell *home*. He does so; then he has a question for Regina:

Joshua: How do you spell *pig*?
Regina: Pig? P-I-G. Pig.

Joshua then asks Regina about *seat*. Regina tries S-E-E.

Joshua: No.
Regina: Oh. I don't know.
Joshua: Give up?
Regina: I don't want to know.
Joshua: I want you to know.

Soon Jake and Jesse enter into the spelling duel, which continues off and on throughout the remainder of journal time. Regina tries to draw Maggie in, but she can't quite get into the spirit:

Regina: (to Maggie) Do you know how to spell *sweet*?
Maggie: I don't care if I don't.
Regina: Just spell it.
Maggie: OK. S-W-E-T.
Regina: No, S-W-E-E-T.
Maggie: Well, I was close but no cigar.

Spelling duels were engaged in by all the children in a gamelike spirit. Gloating about one's spelling skill, as Regina did earlier, was not acceptable. For example, when Rueben persisted in asking Jesse how to spell words he did not know, Jesse retorted: "Hey, just tell me another word what I can spell!" Jake consistently reprimanded children who gloated (including Jesse, Reuben, and Regina): "You didn't know how to spell *house* in the first place, so you shouldn't be talking."

Critiquing the content of others' pictures or stories was more difficult than critiquing their mechanics. Although children sought help with the mechanics of their stories, they rarely sought help with the logic of their efforts. As noted above, opportunities for critiquing written texts were dependent upon text displays; such displays occurred through rereading texts for self (but loud enough to be heard by one's neighbors) or through spontaneous public sharing. Critiquing content was also difficult because the children could not spontaneously offer the correct way to fulfill another's intention, so to speak; that is, they could not control what another child wanted to accomplish.

The children, however, could and did question the logic of others' efforts by referring to the internal consistency of the story; Jesse, for example, asked Jake how the "fastest jet in the world" could get captured by the bad guys. The children also questioned the consistency of objects or characters in the story with the way the world worked; to illustrate, Jake told Regina, "Brownies do not wear pink," as he noted her pink-shirted girl wearing a Brownie cap. In addition, they critiqued the written language itself, its clarity or grammaticality; for example, Maggie asked Jake, who had written about *shooting them*, "Who's the *them*?" Regina noted that Jake's *There is sharks* needed an *are*.

In this critiquing, the children were often forced to wrestle with the distinction between the real and the story world. They marked their own and others' stories as "real" or "not real." Mitzi even accused Jake of "lying in your story," which suggests a concern with how real "not real" has to be. Manuel came closest to explicitly stating the intellectual issue; during a dispute about whether or not one could make a volcano out of sand he noted, "Well, anyway, it's a pretend story. In real life, it may [not] be true." That is, the criteria for literary truth are different from those for factual, "real life," truth. The children's operational definitions of these criteria were suggested and opened to criticism as they moved between story and "real life" worlds.

In critiquing the content of another's drawing or story, the children were not engaged in behavior specific just to the journal activity. They regularly critiqued any peer statement that did not square with their perceptions of the world, including comments about how rain and snow operate, how dogs age, how young mothers can be (during the course of a "My-mother-was-a-teen-age-mother" discussion), how and whether being "a little bit chubby" is essential to the body's functioning, how bad "junk food" is, how probable World War IV is ("Did they already have World War III?"), whether or not everyone was indeed "born in the USA," and on and on. Their mental wrestling seems captured by Tizard and Hughes's (1984, p. 114) term, "passages of intellectual search." Tizard and Hughes apply this concept to mothers and their preschoolers, but these early school age children's eagerness to verbally explore--puzzle through--confusions and contradictions certainly merits the term.

To this point, then, we have looked at the children spontaneously displaying their own competence and monitoring others' displays. In these interactions, the children were not working toward any clearly specified educational objective nor were they playing out the rules of any specific language arts activity. They were simply being kids together in their own classroom. Next, we turn briefly to an interesting and contrasting situation--the weekly spelling quiz.

Gauging competence through grading: "What'd you get?" Shortly after the beginning of the study, Margaret, the children's teacher, initiated weekly spelling tests. She would give the children 10 words on Monday, telling the second graders to learn all of them and the first graders to study five of them; quizzes were held on Fridays. Margaret graded the quizzes by putting the number right on the top of each paper. She did not mark papers as "passing" or "failing"; she commented directly to individual children, remarking that they had done well or should study harder.

Margaret's low key approach to this language arts activity contrasts with that of the earlier discussed teacher in School A, whose children could "pass" or "fail" such tasks. Nonetheless, Margaret's children reacted to this task just as School A children reacted to tasks judged "right" or "wrong" by their teacher. The children did not focus on the spelling words themselves, as they did at least partially in their own spontaneous spelling duels, but attended solely to the evaluation of their performance. And that evaluation was different from the flexible evaluation provided by peers.

For, during the spelling duels, a child could always point out to a peer something else he or she knew, dismiss a particular word as unimportant, bide time until an easier word came up, or find a word an overly confident peer couldn't spell--gloating peers would usually receive their due. Performance in the spelling quiz, on the other hand, was inflexible and defined by the teacher's written score. One could not say, "Ask me another word what I can spell" to the teacher, nor could one dismiss the necessity of the chosen words ("Maybe I don't need to [know how to spell it].")

Faced with these fixed scores, the children had to find other ways of ameliorating the evaluations--and the institutionalized gloating inherent in the scores' existence (i.e., the numbers proclaimed some children better than others). For example, in one observed event, Jake first admired and then, egged on by Jesse, put down Sonia for her good performance on a quiz.

Ex. 17 Margaret passes back the children's spelling papers, as they sit working in their journals. The children immediately begin displaying their own evaluations (their "number right") and monitoring those of others:

Sonia: I got 9 right. I got'em all right.
Jake: She got almost--she got 'em all right.
(looks at his own paper) 5 right. (neutral tone)
Jesse: (laughs at Jake but does not reveal his own score)
Manuel: 7. I only got one wrong.
Sonia: Uh, uh.
Jesse: (to Jake) Cross that out and put um 8 right.
Jake: No. (irritated)
Jesse: Oh yeah, put 1 right. (laughs)
Jake: No, I'll put-- (devious)
Jesse: Zero right. (laughs)
Jake: Yeah. (Jake scratches out the number 5 and puts the paper away.)

Later in the morning, when Sonia shows her paper to me, Jake grabs it.

Jake: Give it here. (grabs paper)
Sonia: No.
Jesse: Oh, yeah. Give it here.
Sonia: No ooo. Give it to me, Jesse.

Margaret comes over to the table and retrieves Sonia's paper. Sonia, looking frustrated and close to tears, folds up her paper and stuffs it into her pocket. Jake giggles:

Jake: We got her.
Jesse: Yeah.

In previous examples, Jake and Sonia displayed their friendship; they were consistently interested in and supportive of each other's efforts. (Recall that Jake did not tease Sonia over her inability to ride a two-wheeler; see Example 9.) Both children defended others whose competence was under attack by peers, as has also been seen in previous examples. Yet, in this example, they are set apart from each other because Sonia performed well on a spelling test. Jake and Jesse resorted to peer group play to "get" the child who had done so well, and Sonia received a vivid demonstration of how performing well in school can isolate one from one's friends. Ironically enough, all of the children valued the ability to spell; in fact, both Jake and Jesse were better spellers than Sonia in the children's spelling duels. It was the evaluation of performance on the spelling test that caused the tension.

It is not my intention here to criticize spelling quizzes in the primary grades. While the children did discuss spellings and engage in spelling duels before Margaret began the quizzes--and in fact did so the previous year when there were no quizzes--

certainly their valuing of spelling was related to its value in the adult word, including the world of school. However, the children's response to the spelling quiz suggests the possible consequences of language arts programs which, like that of the traditional classroom in School A, place all of the children's language use under the evaluative authority of the teacher. One sees here a possible preview of a conflict between the way school may work--to single out the achieving individual--and the way the peer group worked--to allow children to collaboratively work out flexible, face-saving, and, at times, playful ways of displaying and acknowledging competence.

Being Special

The children did not aspire only to be competent--they wanted to be special. "Special" here refers to being distinctive in some way--to rising above the crowd. The observed children were aware of the concept of "famous," as noted earlier. Pop singers Michael Jackson and Boy George, for example, were cited as "famous." Being famous did not involve being particularly competent on social conventions, like spelling or punctuating. Being famous seemed most associated with being recognized for one's ability to create particular, meaningful objects or acts--or even for the creation of one particularly powerful object:

Ex. 18

Manuel:	I want to be famous.
Sonia:	Go on Kids Incorporated. A whole bunch of kids--
Jesse:	Yeah.
Sonia:	You have to be a good singer I mean, like Boy George.
Manuel:	I want to be in a movie. I also want to be a famous artist or singer.
Sonia:	I think you would be better at the artist.
Manuel:	Still, I have a good voice. I wouldn't sing rock stuff.
Sonia:	Oooooh. (Gross)

Manuel, as it happened, was recognized by the group as especially artistic--they called him an "artist." Jake even drew a picture of Manuel at the paint easel. Jake himself was considered by at least some children to be a potentially "famous inventor by the time you're ten," because of his invention of the bubble car.

While not all of the children aspired to be famous, all on at least one occasion remarked about a peer's particularly "neat" production or commented on their own "neatness." For example, Manuel, on having invented a "magic word" in his story, observed: "God, I don't know how I made up those words. Never heard of them before." Maggie, on having written a story about a circus made of yarn, remarked: "I can't believe what I'm writing. This is so funny." And Sonia, on having drawn and written an entry on a sunset, commented: "Isn't this a good picture? I'm gonna put this story in a tape. It's real good."

Of course, one can also be special by defying convention; the children, for example, were very aware of who had been expelled or suspended from school. And one can be special by associating with people perceived as special. Jesse seemed to seek such specialness by associating with Jake. He linked himself to Jake in his comments to peers (e.g., "That's where me and Jake worked on our pictures") and to Jake himself

(e.g., "Hey Jake, remember when we talked too much?"). He often agreed with ("Right") or repeated with minor variations Jake's comments (see Examples 3, 7, 14, and 17). He even explicitly commented to me,"I have to do the same what Jake does."

"Doing the same what Jake does" points up a dilemma--to what extent can one borrow another's "specialness"? As noted earlier, the children monitored and copied peers' behaviors. But for most children, particularly for the second graders, there was a clear qualitative distinction between adopting a peer's technique or procedure and copying line-by-line a written story or a drawn picture. Writing conventions, such as letter formations, spellings, and punctuation marks could be copied, as could particular literary techniques (e.g., ending parts of stories with "to be continued"). The exact and whole structure of a story or a picture, however, was the individual's--part of what made that person special; even a particular story element (i.e., a particular character or action) could achieve almost "patent" status and, thus, could not be copied.

Copying was a particular problem for Jesse. He attempted to copy both Jake and Manuel, whose journals he admired and both of whom drew and wrote much better than he did. Jake had no patience with this behavior. Once when Jesse made a bubble car (Jake's "invention"), Jake was so upset that he would not let Jesse sit by him the next day. Manuel was more patient: he would let Jesse copy, but he made it clear that Jesse's story and picture should somehow be different:

Ex 19 Jesse has been trying to make his picture just like Manuel's. He seems to think that Manuel should be pleased by this: "Like it, Manuel?" He repeatedly questions Manuel about how to get particular effects. Manuel thinks this copying behavior is all right, but:

Manuel:	Just don't make exactly the same picture.
Jesse:	Except not with the garbage can. (Jesse had noted earlier that he doesn't make garbage cans.) Same story?
Manuel:	No.
Jesse:	I'll make a different story.
Manuel:	I don't want people to think I copied off you.
Jesse:	Yeah, or I copied off you. I--
Manuel:	I know because then we'll both get bad reputations.
Jesse:	Yeah. And we don't want that. Right?
Manuel:	No.

Being with One's Friends

Beyond--and as a part of--managing resources and collaboratively acknowledging competence and specialness, the children simply enjoyed being with each other, sharing past experiences and playfully creating together new ones. In many of the previous examples, the children shared their common experiences in the "real" world. In the following examples, the children play in imaginary worlds. That is, to use Garvey's (1977) definition of play, the children are shown participating in spontaneous, nonliteral, pleasurable and engaging activity that is its own reward. The children's play could involve writing tools, as when pencils become swords, or, more often in this context, simply language itself, as in the following age/grade play:

Ex. 20

Max: How much old are you?
Jesse: Six.
Max: Me too. So we're sixth grade.
Jake: I'm seventh grade.
Jesse: I'm 100th grade.
Jake: You're not even 100.

Sometimes the children engaged in dramatic narrative play, in which elaborate stories would be collaboratively spun. Oral stories sometimes evolved as an accompaniment to and support for a child's drawing and writing. However, in these instances, the desire for a unique--special--content was clear: the author had the final say in whether or not an idea was incorporated into the narrative.

Jake's narrative play is particularly interesting, as he consistently engaged in a great deal of such play during journal time and because the nature of his play changed over the two years of observation. During the previous year in the first grade, Jake's narrative stories had evolved during drawing as he interacted playfully with his friends. He consistently drew and talked about the actions of powerful vehicles, especially jets, and adventurous men. His peers' amused laughter and comments led to more elaborate plots:

Ex. 21

Jake: I'm gonna make a mechanical man.
Manuel: A mechanical man? You mean a robot man?
Jake: Yeah. I'm gonna make a robot man. You got it, Manuel.
. . .
Here's a bomb head. [The "mechanical/robot" man's head has two lines extending from it.]
It's gonna explode. It hasn't even exploded yet.
When it does--
Manuel: I hope it explodes in the next century.
Johnny: It's not going to be for real.
Manuel: Well, in the future it is.
Jake: Yeah, in the future it is.
. . .
Here comes the bomb explosion! There is the fire, a little smoke.
[Jake is making quick back and forth motions with his marker.]
. . .
I'm gonna make a flying earthling.

Although Jake told dynamic narratives while drawing, his actual written stories simply described his pictures. For the above journal entry, in which Jake had drawn and talked about a robot man and a flying earthling, Jake wrote:

> One upon a time there were two men. One was flying up in to the clouds. The other man was staying on the ground.
> The and.

During his second grade year, Jake's lively narrative play began to accompany his writing as well as his drawing, and only then did it begin to appear as well in his written text. For example, in the following event from the second grade year, Jake was writing about Manuel:

Ex. 22 Manuel notices his name in Jake's journal:

Manuel: What are you writing about?
Jake: You.
Manuel: What do you know about me?
Jake: I'm not gonna talk about you. I'm just gonna make sure you get blown to pieces.
Manuel: Blown to pieces?

Soon Jake was ready for the fateful event:

Jake: Watch out, Manuel [writes *blow up*].

Later, Jake relents and has Manuel survive:

Jake: I think I'm gonna write--I already wrote about you and you're OK.
Manuel: Thanks for that.
Jake: Here I'll tell it to you from the beginning.

Jake's story read as follows:

Once there was a boy that is named Manuel. Manuel is going to fly the fastest jet and I am going to fly the jet too. But Manuel's headquarters is going to blow up But I am OK. But I don't know about Manuel but I am going to find Manuel. But when I find him I like him. But I think I see him. He is in the jet. Manuel are you OK? Yes I am OK. You are being attacked. I will shoot the bad guys out of the universe. OK yes shoot them now. The end.

Jake's texts, as in the above excerpt, broke free of the static time frame of a picture and now contained the dynamic movement of a movie screen. (For a discussion of time/space distinctions in children's pictures and texts, see Dyson, 1986.)

As did their critiques of production content, dramatic narrative play confronted the children with the distinction between the real and the pretend--but in play surrounding journal production the distinction became more complicated. There was the enacted real world, the imaginative world of living, three-dimensional players, the imaginary world of two-dimensional graphics, and the world created through linear strings of words.

Ex. 23 In a later journal story event, Jake has Manuel meet Buck Rogers. Jake tells Manuel to be careful because if he doesn't do what Buck Rogers says, he will get blown to pieces when Manuel and Buck take on the bad guys. Then Marcos (Manuel's brother) "wouldn't see your brother again, Marcos. You would never see him in a story again."

Manuel: Oh God. Oh, well. It's been fun having adventures with you. Um, but I'm gonna get blown to pieces.
. . .

Jake: You might get your butt saved by Buck Rogers. You want your butt saved by Buck Rogers?

Manuel: What I want is my body saved. I don't wanna die. I don't want--

. . .

Jake: You want your whole body saved by Buck Rogers?

In Jake's story, Buck does teach Manuel how to take on the bad guys--his existence in the text world is secured. In a similar event, Maggie announced that she was going to erase her "running princess," a drawn figure that turned out rather poorly. Sonia objected: "Sonia means princess . . . I am a princess who runs. Maggie! You're going to kill me." And, alas, the two-dimensional player died--but the three-dimensional one just laughed.

THE CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES AS UNINTENTIONAL HELPING

In this paper, I have argued for recognition and appreciation of young children's social concerns in school. While they admire and aspire to the adult world, children also resist the adult world in an effort to define themselves as "children" (Corsaro, 1985, who builds on the ideas of Goffman, 1961). Moreover, within the child collective, early school age children both bind themselves together as a group and also seek to define themselves as competent but unique individuals.

In the previous section, we have seen the social networking of a group of young children--their displays and admiration of competence, their critiques of themselves and others, their desire to both rise above and enjoy each other's company. We have also seen that written language was a part of the knowledge and skill valued by the children and, in addition, that it was a social tool that helped them to connect with, and distinguish themselves among, their peers.

While these children were in a nontraditional classroom, they and their age mates on the other side of the country, in School A, were similar in that they valued and made use of literacy in their own social worlds. The observed social networking about and through written language seems an invaluable support for literacy development. From a broad developmental perspective, becoming competent in the written language symbol system involves distinguishing the unique symbolic nature of written language from other symbol systems (Dyson, 1986). This differentiation includes understanding the relationship between speech and print (i.e., encoding or spelling), between lived experience and experience transformed into and through print, between the perspective of the writer and that of the potential readers. And it was just this sort of poking and pulling at written language and at each other that the children engaged in.

With their "How do you spell?'s" the children pushed words at each other--and, of course, they helped each other spell those words. But in their quest for specialness, they exhibited what some adults never do--an understanding of what is social convention and what is individual creation in writing. Those individual creations, though, were clearly supported by the group. Their narrative playing helped some children, like Jake, formulate their tales and begin to figure out how one achieved dynamic movement in static words. Their critiques--their "Who's the them?'s"--caused reflection about the distinction between writer and reader, "creator" and "recreator." The children's continual movement between pretend and "real" worlds forced them to confront the essence of

good literature--"lies" that ring true. And their "Look at me's" and "Look at you's" highlighted particular literary techniques and procedures that made written text appealing to their readers, to each other.

Indeed, the children were providing for themselves much more sophisticated lessons than adults could ever hope to. In Britton's words:

> In taking part in rule-governed behavior--and that might be a wine-and-cheese party, a debate, a game of volley-ball [or story writing]--the novice, the individual learner, picks up the rules by responding to the behavior of others, a process precisely parallel to the mode by which the rules first came into existence. (1985, p. 74)

Observations of the children illustrated too, as did the observation of School A children, that the potentially positive relationship between the children's social world and the academic world is a fragile one. If children are not allowed to communicate with each other in school, then their networking may go underground. That underground social world may still involve literacy--in fact, it may involve a wide variety of types of literacy--but the degree to which children can collaboratively probe the nature of written language will be limited by the clandestine nature of that world. Moreover, when writing becomes subject to the rigid and hierarchical evaluation of the institution of schooling, written language in the official school world may no longer be a tool to bind children together--but a divisive force in the children's social lives.

IN CONCLUSION, SOME DISCLAIMERS

I am suggesting here the potentially positive power of the children's social world to support written language growth. However, I wish to stress here what I am not suggesting.

First, I am not suggesting that children need to be turned "loose" or that an organized and organizing teacher--a structuring of the language arts curriculum--is unnecessary. Obviously there was a very definite structure in the observed classroom in School 0 and that structure was heavily dependent on the children's teacher, Margaret. The children were concerned about the journal task at least partially because Margaret expected them to accomplish something in that journal. Her admonitions to stay on task, her queries about their progress, her "celebrations" of their efforts all provided the academic structure that the children were reacting to in forming their own social world (Corsaro, 1985). If there is no structure, the children have nothing to gather together within--and, as any experienced teacher knows, chaos often results.

Second, I am not suggesting that children's work should not be evaluated. The children evaluated themselves and each other continually. Moreover, Margaret evaluated their journal writing regularly, and that evaluation caused no difficulty. She pointed out to individuals what she thought they were doing well--and she had them erase and do over things she thought were not up to an individual's standard. However, no one else was being praised when that individual was being critiqued. The evaluation was private. In addition, Margaret and the whole group celebrated individual children's completed journals. And the children clapped for and spontaneously praised that work while it was shared. But no one was being put down when one child was being celebrated. The problem came with the inflexible evaluation entailed by the written mark,

as in the official spelling quizzes. Unlike Margaret's proofreading notes, that mark could not be erased and the error fixed. Further, the written mark was institutionalized gloating--putting one child up and others down. And gloating was not tolerated in the children's world. I question, then, whether publicly comparative evaluation, particularly evaluation capsuled in fixed scores, has a place in the early school years, when children are in the process of defining themselves as peers and as scholars.

Finally, I am also not suggesting that the children's social world causes no problems. Clearly it does. Jesse was a good example. He was so caught up with being like someone else in his first grade year that his style of creating, which had been so dynamic in kindergarten (see Dyson, 1986), was lost. There will undoubtedly be children who will need support from the teacher and, perhaps, some manipulation of the social group--of the peer groups with whom individual children write, for example--in order to find a comfortable and productive writing situation.

However, this problem of finding self and group--the "I", the "you," and the "we"--is a problem worth dealing with. It is the problem we all face as people and, of course, as writers. When we move beyond utilitarian writing--the grocery lists, the paperwork--writing has to do with wanting to appear competent--knowledgeable about the social conventions of writing--and yet also wanting to say something special, something unique, that will be judged valuable by others. There is no reason to assume that writing is any different for school children. To pull writing out of the network of peers is to deny children the opportunity to experience the tension between individual expression and social communication that is the living tension of language use.

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